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Military order of the loyal legion
of the United States

A night attack of cavalry



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Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States

A NIGHT ATTACK OF CAVALRY

By SIDNEY DE KAY, LATE U. S. V.

THE MORTAR FLOTILLA AT FORTS JACKSON AND ST. PHILIP

By GEORGE W. BROWN, LATE U. S. N.



PRINTED FOR
THE COMMANDERY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK
BY D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

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A NIGHT ATTACK OF CAVALRY.

*A Poem recited by SIDNEY DE KAY, late Brevet-Major U. S. V., at a Meeting of
the New York Commandery, Loyal Legion, April 4, 1888.*

HUSH-SH! Soft the full moon's rays
Fall on our ranks close pressed,
Making our sabers laugh;
While many a heart sinks low,
Thinking of far-off homes.

Ha! all the firmer grasp
Take we of our good steeds
And of our weapons bright,
Till man and horse and blade
Tremble—to get the word:

“Charge!” Deep strike the spurs;
Forward we dash in line,
Till with a mighty crash
Into their midst we leap,
Driving and crushing them!

Hi! ya! See how they drop
’Neath our swift, gleaming steel!
We are not human now—
We are but raging fiends;
We slash, and seek to kill
While any foeman stays.

“Halt!” On our horses’ manes
Wiping our bloody swords,
Stupid we gaze around—
What are those writhing forms?
O God! what have we done?

Woe ! woe ! Where all was still,
Hear now the anguished groans
Of wretches maimed ; and there
Lie, in the bright moonlight,
The dead !

THE MORTAR FLOTILLA,

AND ITS CONNECTION WITH THE BOMBARDMENT AND
CAPTURE OF FORTS JACKSON AND ST. PHILIP.

*A Paper read by Lieutenant GEORGE W. BROWN, Late U. S. N., at a Meeting of
the Commandery, State of New York, Military Order, Loyal Legion, May 2, 1888.*

DURING the latter part of the year 1861, Commander (now Admiral) David D. Porter conceived the idea of using sea-coast mortars afloat for the reduction of forts. Consequently, some twenty schooners that had been purchased for light cruisers were fitted out with one thirteen-inch mortar each, and from two to four guns broadside. The preparation of these vessels to carry and use this heavy piece of ordnance required very great care. They were filled in almost solid from the ceiling to the deck with heavy timber, to enable the deck to withstand the effects of the recoil and concussion. The mortars, or "chowder-pots" as they were generally dubbed, measured about four feet across the muzzle, and say five feet in length, and weighed eighteen thousand pounds; the carriage, of iron, about ten thousand pounds; and the bed, or table, seven thousand pounds—in all about sixteen or seventeen tons. The vessels varied from one hundred and sixty to two hundred and fifty tons, and carried a crew of about forty men each.

The ship sailed from New York for Key West during the month of January, 1862. I was the first officer ordered to the command of either of these vessels, and, having my choice, I selected one of the smallest—the Dan Smith—a schooner built for the fruit-trade, and very fast—in fact, the best sailer of the fleet. The mortar, a vast chunk of

iron on a carriage, and that on a "turn-table" mounted on eccentric rollers, brought the ponderous weight high up from the deck, and was the cause of no little concern during the first gale of wind, which we encountered in the Gulf a few days after leaving New York. I took notice that no one liked to pass to leeward of it when the vessel was lying over much; in other words, they always "kept to windward."

Among the crew shipped in New York was a landsman from the Emerald Isle by the name of Pat —, who had served three months in the army. As Pat was not sailor enough to "take the wheel," and was no use aloft, not knowing the jib down-haul from the fore-sheet, his turn at the "lookout" came very often. One night, while in cold weather, he came on deck from his warm hammock, and was stationed on the weather-bow to keep a sharp lookout. Just then we shipped a heavy sea over the bow, drenching poor Pat to the skin. This was not relished by Pat, and he gave vent to his displeasure with—"O holy Moses! the divil take me fri'nds sure! Ah! me fri'nds advised me to go to sea in the navy, and not go in the army ag'in, for a sailor, says they, always has a house over his head; but the very divil was in them when they give me that advice sure!" I have skipped some of the hard words that he said from time to time as he got ducked during his lookout hour that night.

There were some very interesting adventures during the trip, but time will not allow me to relate them here; I will only mention this: One afternoon a sail was sighted. I kept off for her, and soon discovered that it was a bark heading nearly the same course as ourselves, and carrying full-sail. As I changed my course to near her, she changed to avoid me. This at once looked suspicious, and we all smelled prize-money. The breeze that had been moderate began to freshen, and the little Dan Smith cut through the water lively; a change of wind brought the stranger to windward to his advantage, and he tacked ship, I after him, the wind increasing to half a gale, yet I carried

sail until the water stood on deck half-way to the hatches before I reefed. Squalls of rain during the night would obscure the stranger, and he would change his course to escape us. Thus all night the chase continued, all hands on deck, their palms itching to get hold of the prize; for surely it must be a blockade-runner, or why this dodging? About eight o'clock in the morning we overhauled her, and, very much to our surprise and disgust, she proved to be the Snap-Dragon, from New York, loaded with quartermasters' stores for Tortugas. Her captain had thought our little rakish schooner was a rebel privateer, and had used his best efforts to escape capture. Of course, both felt tired and mad, as we had run fully one hundred miles out of our course in the chase.

The fleet rendezvoused at Key West, and thence to Ship Island. While waiting for Farragut's fleet, the mortar-schooners were ordered by turns to make short cruises along the Gulf-coast. One morning, while we were cruising off Mobile, a steamer was sighted heading off shore, and we gave chase. The breeze was just what we wanted for all sail, and we soon found that we were gaining on the steamer. I shifted one of my twelve-pound rifles forward, and opened fire on her. As good luck would have it, we landed a shell on her deck-load of cotton, for this was, in truth, a blockade-runner. She began throwing cotton overboard, to lighten ship to escape us, as we were gaining fast; again the palms itched, and Jack began to calculate what his share might be, when, "O fickle Fortune!" the wind dropped like a wet blanket, and our "prize" hoisted the "Stars and Bars" and steamed away. We, however, lowered our boats and picked up a deck-load of cotton, and returned to Ship Island. The boys made about three months' wages out of this capture.

Shortly afterward we sailed for and entered the Mississippi, preparatory to the attack on Forts Jackson and St. Philip. A little incident, which proved of great value, happened while waiting at the Southwest Pass for orders to proceed up the river. My vessel was alone; others

either had not arrived or had already gone up the river. When we left New York, as a precaution, we were ordered under no circumstances to cast loose the mortar or fire it at sea, as, if by any accident it got adrift with any motion on, it would endanger the vessel being capsized. In port we had exercised the crews in the manual, but not one of the mortars had been fired, and we were going into action, as I thought, "blind."

Considering my "sea-orders" over, and as I was the senior officer present—which every naval officer improves to command somebody—I thought I would assume command (of myself) and try the mortar in earnest; so we went through all the preparations for action; loaded the mortar with a full-service charge of twenty pounds of powder, cut a fuse for four thousand yards, and, after several changes of sighting one side and then the other, I gave the order to fire. The crew, according to the manual, had been taught to "stand in the rear of the piece on tip-toe, with mouth and ears open"; but, as this was real, and I did not just know what the thing would do, I ordered them farther away, while I, with my officers, noted the time of flight of the shell, and the time of sound from the explosion of the shell; after which I took a survey of the deck. The mortar had recoiled off the turntable back against the side, driving the rear of the carriage into the water-ways, and listing the vessel about ten degrees. The concussion had taken nearly every door off the hinges, the arms-chest and round-houses collapsed, and other slight damage. Pat was the first to call attention. He stood fixed with his hands upon his hips, looking at the mortar-carriage stuck in the water-way. "O howly Jasus, and wouldnt I have been in the hell of a fix, if I had stayed where they tould me? Sure me legs would have been gone entirely!" Such really would have been the case. For my discovery I was rewarded with a "day off," and breechings were ordered to be fitted on the mortars of all the vessels. This heretofore had been deemed unnecessary.

The commander of our division, in closing his report, alludes to this as follows: "I have only to add that, as the vessels and mortars are now fitted, the preparation for action and the service of the mortars made beforehand were ample, and did not require to be altered in the least during the bombardment, nor have any suggestions from the seven days' actual service been made in the way of improvement, except, as a precaution, the breeching around the turntable." The shells weighed 216 pounds, contained 11 pounds of powder, and, with the service-charge of 20 pounds, fired at an angle of 45° , the range was 4,200 yards. The mortars are generally fired at an angle of 45° , so the charge is regulated by the distance of the object. One pound of powder will carry a thirteen-inch mortar-shell 300 yards. The flight of a mortar-shell, being on a curved line, is 3,000 yards in twenty-five seconds; 4,000 yards in twenty-nine seconds; 4,200 yards in thirty and a half seconds. The sound from the exploding shell will return at about 1,100 feet per second. A cannon-shot, being on a straight line, will go 1,000 yards in three seconds, and 2,000 yards in seven seconds. The vessels were prepared for action by sending down topmasts, unbending part of their sails, and coming up with fore-rigging, etc. On the morning of the 18th we were all anchored about five or six miles below the forts. The steamers belonging to the "mortar flotilla" were ordered to tow us into position. At ten o'clock the first were taken into position and immediately opened fire.

The officers in command of the steamers were not accustomed to the towing business, and made very slow work of it, so that some of us were left lying at anchor, while the others were blazing away at the forts. About noon I signaled for permission to "sail into action," which was granted, and I at once got under way, and with jib and mainsail, having a fair wind, ran up and took my position at the head of the third division, and opened fire. Just previous to reaching the position where ordered to anchor, a shell from Fort Jackson passed between our masts and struck the water close to us. Our Emerald friend again

afforded much amusement to the crew by jumping behind the mortar, and when ridiculed for his dodging gave this very good reason: "Sure that baste is better able to take it than what I am." I have seen the time that I would like to have had just such a "baste" to get behind; but I always found it took more courage to dodge than to stand and take my chance. The vessels were anchored near the right bank of the river, a hawser run ashore from the bow, and a spring-line from the quarter, and, thus moored at an angle with the bank, their hulls were covered from the enemy by the trees and bushes. The old order of things was changed during this action: the captain had to go aloft, while Jack stayed below.

When we began firing, I took my position at the main mast-head, where I could see the forts and trace the flight of our shells, and did the sighting of the mortar at an elevation of about seventy feet above it. Different methods were adopted for this purpose on the various vessels. It was thought, before we commenced, that we could use a compass, and from the mast-head give the course to fire; but the concussion unhung the compass-cards, so that was abandoned, and we, as was often the case, were left to our own resources. I adopted parallel bars, taking two pieces of scantling. The upper one I had on the cross-trees; the other suspended from and parallel to that near the deck, weighted so as to keep it steady. I sighted and pointed the upper one for the fort; the officer in charge on deck sighted the mortar by the lower one. When the mortar was fired, the little vessel would settle down in the water nearly a foot, careen over a streak or two, and shoot astern, bringing a heavy strain on the hawser and chain, and switch us poor fellows at the mast-head round so that at times it was a question whether we would stay there, or, like Dave Crockett's coon, "come down." But the switching of our masts and the chance of a rebel shell were not our greatest discomfort upon this roost, for we were between two fires. Our vessels were moored close together, each with her head a little off shore, so that each fired over the quarter of

the one ahead, and, as they fired at an angle of forty-five degrees, the line of fire was not far from our positions at the main mast-head, and I frequently felt the windage of the shell from the next in line, and the concussion was very severe upon us, even more than from our own; and more than once I felt the force of the expression, "God save me from my friends!" The commander of our division in his report said: "The masters commanding the different vessels of the division gave the direction of the fire from the main-mast-head, regulating the charges used as required. They kept their posts while engaged with scarce any relief, subject not only to the shock of their own mortars, but also from the one in their rear." We were kept under constant fire night and day for six long days. My poor men were so worn and sleepy that, when we were firing only every twenty minutes, they would drop on deck and fall asleep, and the firing of the mortar in our rear would not disturb them, and nothing short of a kick would rouse them when it came our turn to fire. Admiral Porter, in his report, said: "Overcome with fatigue, I have seen the commanders and crews lying fast asleep on deck, with a mortar on board the vessel next to them thundering away and shaking everything around them like an earthquake."

To give some idea of what these twenty little vessels did in the week's bombardment, I will give a brief report of the third division, consisting of six vessels. They fired 415, 449, 460, 474, 478, and 493 shells respectively, the latter my own vessel, leading the fleet by fifteen shells. The total fired was about 8,100 shells, weighing 1,728,000 pounds, and expending 250,000 pounds of powder. On the second day of the bombardment the M J. Carleton was ordered from the left bank of the river to the right and drop in just astern of my vessel; but, as there happened to be a little more space, I slackened my chain and hawser and let him in ahead, he taking half of my old place. He had not been there one hour, when a shell struck his vessel, passing down through her magazine and sinking her in five minutes. But

for my courtesy, my vessel instead of the Carleton would have been sunk.

During the bombardment many amusing incidents occurred, of which but a few can be mentioned here. Just as one of the mortars was being fired, a shell struck fair in the mortar, and was fired back far enough before it exploded to clear the vessel, thereby doing no injury. Another mortar was struck on the face by a shell, which glanced off, doing no harm, leaving only a small indentation, proving what Pat had said in the beginning, that "that baste was better able to take it than he was." My ship's cook had been to the side and drawn a bucket of water, which he was taking to the galley, when a piece of shell (which I now have at home) struck his bucket, knocking it, as the printer would say, "into pi," yet nobody was hurt.

On the morning of the 24th the fleet, under Farragut, started to pass the forts at about 3.30 o'clock. This was no doubt one of the most brilliant sights of the war. The vessels, seventeen in number, carrying about one hundred and fifty guns; the forts, mounting one hundred guns of various sizes; twenty thirteen-inch mortars, and the steamers of the mortar flotilla that engaged the lower or water battery, about thirty guns—say three hundred heavy guns, with their exploding shells; the fire-rafts sent down the river by the rebels; and, later on, the blowing up of several rebel steamers, combined in making one of the grandest spectacular scenes ever witnessed.

The rebels had a chain across the river, near the forts, supported on hulks. Farragut wanted it removed, and sent an expedition to accomplish this object; in his report he said, "Commander Porter, however, kept up such a tremendous fire on them from the mortars, that the enemy's shot did the gunboats no injury, and the cable was separated, and their connections broken sufficiently to pass through on the left bank of the river."

Commander Porter, in his detailed report of the capture of the forts, to the Secretary of the Navy, adds: "It would be an interminable undertaking, sir, if I were to

attempt to give a minute account of all the hard work performed in the flotilla, or mention separately all the meritorious acts and patient endurance of the commanders and crews of the mortar-vessels. All stuck to their duty, like men and Americans; and, though some may have exhibited more ingenuity and intelligence than others, yet the performance of all commanded my highest admiration."

It is not generally known, but it is a fact, nevertheless, that Forts Jackson and St. Philip were surrendered to the mortar flotilla—article fourth of the capitulation being: "On the signing of these articles by the contracting parties, the forts shall be formally taken possession of by the United States naval forces, composing the 'mortar flotilla'; the Confederate flag shall be lowered, and the flag of the United States hoisted on the flag-staff of Forts Jackson and St. Philip."

It is very proper to mention the congratulatory letter from the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, to Commander David D. Porter.

NAVY DEPARTMENT, *May 10, 1862.*

SIR: Your dispatch of April 30th, inclosing the articles of capitulation of Forts Jackson and St. Philip, which surrendered on the 28th ultimo, after a bombardment of one hundred and forty-four consecutive hours by the mortar flotilla, has been received. I have also to acknowledge the receipt of the flags taken in the two forts on that occasion, including the original one hoisted on Fort St. Philip, when the rebel forces declared the State of Louisiana to have seceded from the Union, which have been sent forward to the department.

The important part which you have borne in the organization of the mortar flotilla, and the movement on New Orleans, have identified your name with one of the most brilliant naval achievements on record, and to your able assistance with the flotilla is Flag-Officer Farragut much indebted for the successful results he has accomplished.

To yourself, and the officers and seamen of the mortar flotilla, the department extends its congratulations.

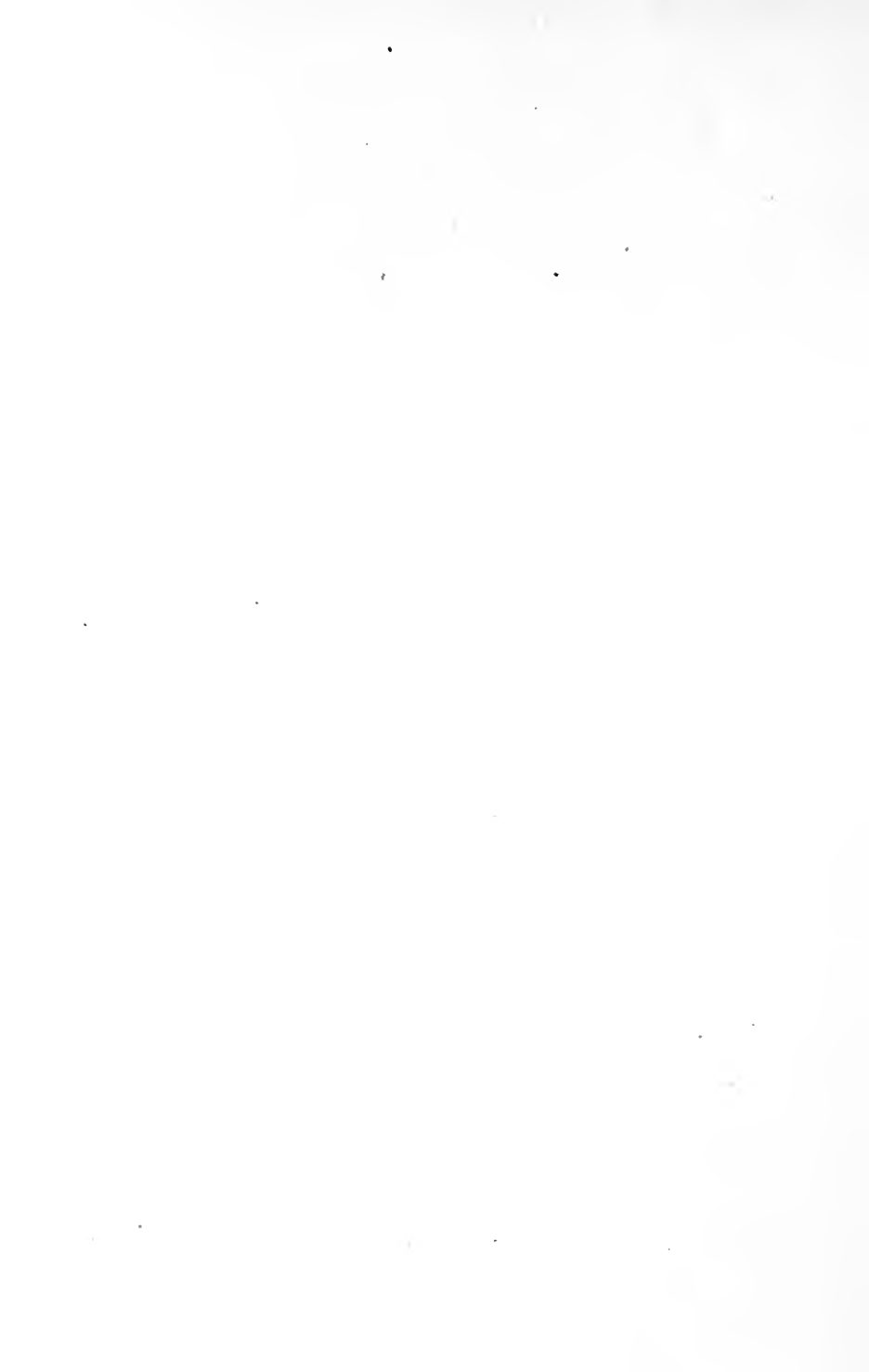
I am, respectfully, etc.,

GIDEON WELLES.

Commander DAVID D. PORTER,

Commanding U. S. Mortar Flotilla, Gulf of Mexico.

It was not my privilege to witness the final surrender, for on the day succeeding the passage of the forts, the 25th of April, I received orders to have my "vessel ready for sea in two hours"; and sailed for Havana, carrying the reports of the passage of the forts by Farragut's fleet. I also took with me the report for "The New York Times," which was the first report published in New York city. I made the remarkably quick run of four days to Havana, and there intercepted the steamer Columbia, and forwarded my dispatches to New York. The Cayuga arrived in Hampton Roads about the same time that the Columbia reached New York; but the Bummer got in ahead, as he did in many cases in the army, during the civil war.



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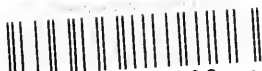
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